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Futurist Book Group Discussion

Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population

by Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer
The MIT Press, ISBN 0262083256

Synopsis of the September 1, 2004 Futurist Book Group meeting; summarized by Ken Harris

The September 2004 selection, discussed at **Politics and Prose**, was ***Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population***. The book's authors, Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. den Boer, place the current trend of the number of boy babies far exceeding the number of girl babies in Asia in its historical context and assess the consequences of this trend for the future. They show that favoritism of male children, even carried to the extent of female infanticide, has deep historic roots, even in Western societies. They cite several principal reasons for this:

- Sons are considered more valuable than daughters when food gathering for a society requires hunting or heavy agricultural labor;
- Parents incur the financial burden of raising a daughter including paying a dowry to her husband's parents only to have the daughter become part of her husband's family;
- Only sons can perform certain religious rites;
- Sons support parents in old age; and
- Sons are more valuable for warfare than daughters.

Favoritism for boy babies, according to the authors, has especially deep historical roots in Asian societies, particularly China and India. Female infanticide was widely practiced in India but was ended by the British colonial administration. However, the ratio of boy to girl babies has steadily risen since independence. Female infanticide, the authors show, was practiced over thousands of years of Chinese imperial history, and, although gender equity was an initial goal of the Communist revolution, that country's one child policy has steadily skewed the sex ratio in favor of males.

Technology has made it far more possible for Chinese and Indian parents to have more boy than girl babies. Ultra-sound technology has become widely available and cheap in these countries, so that parents can know the sex of a fetus before birth. That, coupled with availability of relatively safe abortion, has led to dramatic increases in the ratios of boy to girl babies in China and India. Hence, as boy babies grow up, many will be unable to find wives. They will become "bare branches"—so called

because, like the bare branches of a tree in Winter, they have nothing attached to them and have the appearance of cold and bleakness. The authors estimate the “bare branches” aged 15-34 in India in 2020 will total 28 to 32 million and in China 29 to 33 million.

The “bare branches” will be from the lower socioeconomic strata because the available women will marry above their social station. Accordingly, they will be relegated to a permanent lower social class with a culture characterized by violence and vice. On the basis of historical precedents of societies with an excess of young men, the authors believe the prospect for democracy in China is not good and that India will have difficulty maintaining its democracy.

The Futurist Book Group meets the first Wednesday evening of each month at **Politics and Prose**. See the chapter website, www.natcapwfs.org, for information on forthcoming meetings.

POINTS FOR THE CLASSROOM (send comments to forum@futuretakes.org):

- *In China, to what extent, if any, will the migration from farms to cities impact the preference for male children?*
- *Conversely, if democracy fails or even if it succeeds, what are the long-term implications of the “bare branches” to world peace and to China’s social order?*

The book authors and discussion group participants have shared their words of wisdom – now let’s read yours!